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Against the Grain

Volume 28 | Issue 1 Article 33

2016

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Stacey Marien
American University Library, smarien@american.edu

Alayne Mundt
American University Library, mundt@american.edu

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Recommended Citation
Marien, Stacey and Mundt, Alayne (2018) "Let's Get Technical--A Technical Services Perspective on Taking on a Shared Retention Project, Part 2," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 33.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7291

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Let's Get Technical — A Technical Services Perspective on Taking on a Shared Retention Project, Part 2

Column Editors: **Stacey Marien** (Acquisitions Librarian, American University Library) <smarien@american.edu>

and **Alayne Mundt** (Resource Description Librarian, American University Library) <mundt@american.edu>

In part one of our discussions of a technical services perspective on shared retention projects, (***ATG***, v.27#5, November 2015), **Stacey** and I gave an overview of the retention project **American University** and the other institutions in the **Washington Research Library Consortium (WRLC)** engaged in and the processes by which retention decisions and allocations were assigned in our shared catalog. These changes have had implications for our Acquisitions and Cataloging departments, particularly in the workflows for lost and replacement books. Additionally, questions have been raised about how much authority staff has to correct errors in identifying titles that have been mistakenly marked for retention.

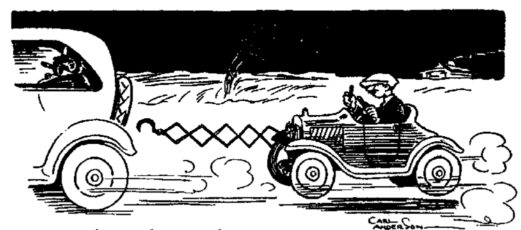
As was discussed in the previous column, titles were identified to be retained if they met certain parameters; that is monographs being published prior to 2005 for which there are more than ten copies in WorldCat held within the United States. These titles have been identified by a retention location code within the shared Voyager catalog, so it is easy for staff to identify which titles will need specialized evaluation and treatment during our lost and replacement books workflows.

In the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) entered into by the participating libraries within the **WRLC**, it was agreed that the library holding a retention title is expected to protect that title from being discarded. The idea was that if a book that was marked for retention was lost or badly damaged, and another participating library in the consortium had a copy, the retention commitment would be transferred. If there was not another copy within the consortium, the original library would make a good faith effort to replace or preserve the lost or damaged copy. Any titles that could not be replaced would be sent to a consortia-level coordinated collections committee for review to determine further action.

It became clear shortly after the retention commitments were assigned that more detailed directions and guidelines were necessary for staff performing the day-to-day work on the collection. Specifically, staff needed to know:

- how to handle lost and damaged books,
- how to report titles that needed further evaluation and possible reassignment,
- how to handle decisions about replacement books that we would typically replace with a newer or different edition,
- what to do when correcting errors when books were mistakenly marked as retention titles due to errors in batch processing or bibliographic data.

A particular area of concern was how to handle textbooks. The usual practice at AU is to replace older textbooks with newer editions or specific editions requested by the collection managers. We now had textbooks marked as retention copies that we would not normally keep. Additionally, there are cases where we do not want to purchase replacement titles for books that have been lost, usually due to a decision on the part of the collection manager or due to other factors such as lack of circulation or age. In those cases, there has been uncertainty about what to do when titles marked for retention are those we do not want to replace. We would normally withdraw these titles and remove the holdings from the catalog. There is also the question of devoting funds to resources we would not normally purchase. We needed more specific guidelines to follow for when we were truly on the hook to purchase replacement retention titles in these instances.



One outcome of ongoing questions on the part of all participating libraries has been the establishment of a **WRLC**-wide task force that is charged with creating a clearer definition for what constitutes a good faith effort in replacing or repairing books. The task force is also charged with establishing clear reporting procedures for reassigning retention commitments to different copies when needed. This task force is primarily comprised of librarians in various technical services departments from several **WRLC** member libraries. The group has developed two types of spreadsheets for the member libraries to use:

1. The **WRLC** reassignment spreadsheet. If there is another copy of a title in the consortium, a library does not have to replace its retained copy. The title and other identifying holdings and item-level information about the book is put on this spreadsheet and the retention location code will eventually be reassigned to another copy within **WRLC**.
2. The Collaborative Collections Committee (CCC) Review Spreadsheet. The CCC is a consortium-wide committee that handles collection development topics. If a library decides not to replace a retained copy and there is no other copy within **WRLC**, the title of the book is placed on this spreadsheet. The CCC will periodically review this spreadsheet to decide an action on each title. The big question is whether and how the CCC will review the spreadsheet on a regular basis. It is conceivable that there will be many titles each month for the committee to review, since all of the **WRLC** schools will be using this spreadsheet to track titles that will not be replaced. To date, the CCC has not begun reviewing this spreadsheet, but we imagine that the committee will have input into how well this tracking system will work and how often they will realistically review it.

Due to the work of the task force and what is outlined in the MOU, we have been able to establish some guidelines that address our specific institutional workflows. This has helped staff performing the day-to-day work to have more specific workflow procedures when working with retention books. Some of the changes to the workflow for replacements and damaged books include using the new problem spreadsheet, the types of information to include on that spreadsheet, where to place the titles in questions and how to communicate to the collection managers about previous editions of textbooks. One question that remains unresolved is how any future problem resolution will be handled once this task force has completed their work and is disbanded.

Throughout the course of this project, there has been variation in how the different libraries in the consortia are handling errors, reviewing the remediation lists, and reviewing titles identified for permanent retention. Staff performing the day-to-day work in these areas at our library was initially very cautious about making even minor corrections, such as when a book had been mistakenly identified as a title meant for retention due to a cataloging error or variation in the local bibliographic record. Having the consortia-wide task force give general guidelines, as well as having regular internal meetings to identify and discuss issues, from an acquisitions and purchasing, cataloging, and a circulation perspective has been beneficial. Learning what other libraries are doing and getting feedback directly from the task force has made staff more comfortable with making changes to correct mistakes when they encounter them.

One of the primary takeaways in the ongoing resolution of the complexities that have arisen out of the shared retention project is

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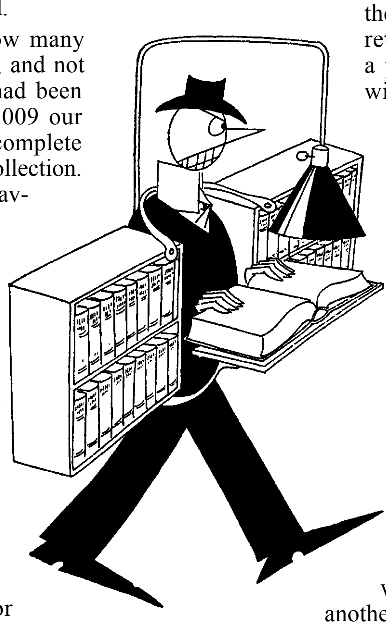
Collection Management Matters — Facing the Ugly Truth: Inventory

Column Editor: **Glenda Alvin** (Associate Professor, Assistant Director for Collection Management and Administration, Head, Acquisitions and Serials, Brown-Daniel Library, Tennessee State University, 3500 John A. Merritt Blvd., Nashville, TN 37209; Phone: 615-963-5230; Fax: 615-963-1368) <galvin@tnstate.edu>

Like our children, we prefer to think of our online catalogs as having only minor flaws. The inventory process may bring us face to face with an unwelcome reality check: the catalog is far, far, far from perfect. The road to as close as we can get to perfection is long, muddy, fraught with potholes and mostly uphill. Sooner or later we have to face reality, because inventory's Day of Reckoning cannot be avoided.

The Circulation Department usually manages the inventory process, and can handle books with wrong statuses or locations, but most of the problems end up in Collection Management. When older books are found that are not linked, decisions have to be made as to whether they should be kept or discarded. Worn and damaged books have to be evaluated for repair or replacement. Books with bibliographic records that are missing item records have to go back to the Cataloging Department. Records with wrong or faded labels have to be corrected.



Weary of guessing how many books we actually owned, and not trusting the figures that had been processed manually, in 2009 our Library Dean ordered a complete inventory of the library's collection. Nobody could remember having done an inventory since the library was automated and it had migrated through three ILS systems during that time. We ordered the inventory product for Millennium and since we did not have a Systems Librarian, the Head of Circulation was designated the Project Leader. She did not think it was necessary to shelf read the collection before initiating the process, nor was there a weeding project conducted prior to starting the book inventory.

Aside from missing or miss-shelved books, wrong locations and statuses in the online catalog, there were a myriad of other problems. The worst of these were books with "dummy barcodes" that were not in the system and bibliographic records without attached records. There were also brief records that needed to be overlaid with full cataloging records. A little further down the list was dusty shelf sitters, many in multiple copies leftover from the 1980s and carried over when we converted the collection from Dewey to Library of Congress Classification. The situation was not helped by the frequent freezes and other software/equipment problems we encountered. It spewed volumes of error lists that had to be checked and re-checked.

Midway through the inventory, the university announced a buyout program and the Head of Circulation, a librarian who had held the position for many years, retired and was replaced by a paraprofessional who was willing to work to complete the inventory, but did not have any experience. The job of project leader then went to the Head of Cataloging, whose attitude was that since the inventory mode was in the Circulation module, it was their responsibility. The inventory limped to a frustrating end and the best thing we could say about it was that it was done.

I suspected that the inventory had been woefully inadequate and this was born out in 2013 when we decided to give it another try with newer inventory software (Circa) and an upgraded system (Sierra). Unlike the first time, we sought the advice of others who had done inventory with the same equipment and the same ILS system. Our preparation was better, because we had meetings to decide what would be done, and how, and each department was clear on their responsibilities. We also made sure we had the laptops and other equipment necessary. Instead of using library staff, we used students assigned to the Circulation area who proved to be remarkably committed to the project and kept it moving at a steady pace. This time the Circulation Supervisor was ready with lessons learned and by then we had hired a Systems/Metadata librarian who took charge of the implementation and procedures.

As soon as the inventory got underway, the Circulation staff started bringing down cart after cart of books that had not been linked. Some were old, but others were the products of indifferent and incomplete cataloging. Each of these carts needed to be sorted for replacing, repairing or discarding. The problems of the previous inventory visited us again, because there were still bibliographic records without item records. However, with the cooperation of the library's wifi, the inventory software provided more useful reports and the process was less frustrating than the first time.

We finished the inventory in a year and we thought the Main Campus holdings were in pretty good shape…..then while I was weeding, I came across a book that did not have any bib record. No matter how careful you think you are being, there are always books that get overlooked in an inventory. We are currently inventorying the collection at our downtown campus, which merged two collections and has never done an inventory. They have a huge number of books that have not been linked and the poor Circulation Librarian has stacks of them four feet high in his office.

Aside from providing a realistic assessment of the library holdings, there are several benefits for collection management when inventory is conducted on a regular basis. It provides a process for weeding and updating the collection. Each time an inventory is conducted the problems are identified and addressed, which enables the integrity of the online catalog to be strengthened. This makes it a more effective resource for our users, who should not go up three floors looking for a book that has been withdrawn from the collection or has been missing for years, without notice. Now that we have a successful process in place, I am lobbying for more features for our inventory equipment, so that we can do a better job of correcting errors from the past.

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how critical it is to involve the staff members who are involved in the day-to-day work in decision making processes. They are the ones who see the different issues that crop up and their input is necessary to know the scope of issues that need tracking and resolution. Additionally, given the scope of this project, staff have often been unsure of how to proceed when making decisions about correcting obvious problems or deciding which editions to purchase as replacements, and involving them in the process both makes the ultimate work smoother but also makes them feel more empowered to make decisions and corrections that they have sometimes been reluctant to make.